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Senate

The Senate met at 3 p.m. and was called to order by the Honorable PETER WELCH, a Senator from the State of Vermont.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Most gracious Father, remind us that we never drift out of Your love and care. Faces may change, and conditions may alter, but You are always there just when we need You most. Thank You for protecting us from seen and unseen dangers, for being our refuge and strength.

Today, lead our Senators to do Your will. May their actions spring from thoughts that are pure, just, true, honest, and good.

And, Lord, we pray for the earthquake victims in Syria and Turkey.

We pray in Your strong Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mrs. MURRAY).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, February 7, 2023.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable PETER WELCH, a Senator from the State of Vermont, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATTY MURRAY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. WELCH thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Democratic leader is recognized.

MEASURE PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—S. 259

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, first a little housekeeping business, and then we will get to the statement.

First, I understand that there is a bill at the desk that is due for a second reading.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will read the bill by title for the second time.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 259) to ensure transparent and competitive transportation fuel markets in order to protect consumers from unwarranted price increases.

Mr. SCHUMER. In order to place the bill on the calendar, under the provisions of rule XIV, I would object to further proceeding.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection having been heard, the bill will be placed on the calendar.

TURKEY AND SYRIA

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I want to begin by offering my prayers to everyone affected by the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Over 6,000 have been reported dead. It is just awful—awful. You see the pictures, and you ache. We stand ready to help however we can.

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Mr. SCHUMER. Tonight, President Biden will come before a joint session of Congress and deliver his State of the Union to the American people. It is a chance for all of us to hear directly from the Commander in Chief about the tremendous progress we have made as a nation, the challenges we have overcome in recent years, and how Democrats are keeping our promises to make the lives of the American people better.

I expect the President will make the case clearly and convincingly that today the United States is far better off than it was a year ago. Inflation is coming down; wages are going up; gas prices have eased at last; unemployment is near record lows; and the pandemic, after causing so much suffering, so much destruction, no longer dominates our lives. Our work is not finished, but today we can confidently say America is headed in the right direction thanks to President Biden's leadership and thanks to the work of a strong, unified Democratic Party in Congress.

As Americans listen to President Biden, I am confident they will see the glaring contrast between Democratic unity on the one hand and Republican chaos on the other. Democrats remain laser-focused on delivering our people-first agenda. Every bill Democrats passed last Congress was written with average Americans in mind, from the American Rescue Plan to the infrastructure bill, to the Inflation Reduction Act, to gun safety, marriage equality, and so, so much more.

Let's just take one example out of many. It is an important example but just one. Senate Democrats worked very hard to deliver a \$35 insulin cap for every American on Medicare, but, of course, we want to go further. We tried to get it for everybody before reconciliation, but the reconciliation bill only allowed us to pass, in the IRA, an insulin cap for some Americans. When

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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an amendment was offered to add everybody in, unfortunately we did not get enough Republicans to vote for it. But this idea deserves new life and bipartisan cooperation in this Congress, and I look forward to hearing more from the President tonight.

Very soon, Americans are going to feel the benefits of our agenda in their daily lives. Implementation is going to be a top priority for Senate Democrats in the months to come. Not everyone has the time to follow what happens in Congress day by day, but when we actually start doing things, implementing the bills, oh, it gets out.

Just look at my home State of New York. After we passed infrastructure, many people didn't hear about it. To others, it was a line in the newspaper—oh, they have a bipartisan infrastructure bill. But last week, when the President came to New York to celebrate Gateway, you could feel the exaltation and excitement in the city. That is going to start happening again and again everywhere, in every State, in every community, as these large bills that helped American families are implemented and people see the actual results in their communities.

So let me say it again. Democrats are proud we stuck together and delivered on an agenda that lowered costs, lifted America out of crisis, and helped lay a foundation for future prosperity. Our MAGA Republicans cannot claim the same. On the very first day in the new majority, House Republicans passed a bill not to help average Americans but, rather, that helps the ultrarich so they can avoid paying their fair share in taxes. The bottom line is, these people who are going to be added to the IRS are going to focus on all of those who are much richer than the average American but pay at a much lower rate. But the Republicans couldn't go for that. Those are the people they want to represent. Then they hardly stopped there. In just 1 month, the MAGA House majority has doubled down on their war on women, tripled down on their asinine national sales tax proposal, and Republicans continue to hold the full faith and credit of the United States hostage to their radical agenda.

In the coming months, nothing will require more cooperation and serious-mindedness than lifting the debt ceiling. I was glad to work with both Presidents Biden and Trump to lift the debt ceiling over the past couple of years. We did it without political blackmail, without brinkmanship. But Speaker MCCARTHY and many of his House MAGA Republicans are taking the debt ceiling hostage and basically saying: Our way or the highway. Agree to cuts or we won't lift the debt ceiling.

That is not going to work, plain and simple. History shows that those who try to threaten their way to an agreement end up losing.

If Speaker MCCARTHY is insistent on spending cuts, which we Democrats will strongly oppose, he has an obliga-

tion to take the next step and actually say what those cuts are for. We will oppose tying the debt ceiling to these types of cuts. The debt ceiling is debts we have already incurred and should be paid without brinkmanship, without adding things to the agenda, which risks a great deal for the American people.

So what are the Republicans asking for? They say they want cuts. What are they? Are Republicans going to ax Social Security or Medicare? We think it is not enough for the Speaker to just say he doesn't want to make those cuts, because Members of his own party, including some of the very MAGA Republicans he followed in the first week of his session, are saying otherwise, and they have shown—some of them—that they can get their way in the new majority. Speaker MCCARTHY needs to prove he won't cut Social Security and Medicare by showing us the plan, his plan.

What about funding for national defense? Our military just shot down the Chinese spy balloon. Are Republicans seriously thinking about cutting defense on some bogus claims of fighting a "woke agenda"? What the heck does that mean?

Republicans, show us the specific cuts. Show us the plan.

What about families and children who rely on nutrition aid? The chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee recently said they are still looking at cuts to SNAP benefits at a time when children are hungry and groceries are far too expensive. This is from the party that cut taxes for billionaires and mega corporations back in 2017. If making sure hungry children have enough to eat is part of the "woke agenda," then we sure don't have the same definition.

Look, I know it is not easy for this new majority. The 20 or so extremists who dictated the House rules package can now thwart whatever proposal the Speaker wants to come up with if they feel the cuts don't go far enough. So I am gravely concerned that things will be very, very hard for the Speaker to manage, if he can come up with a plan at all.

All this brings us back to what Democrats have been insisting on from the very beginning: No brinkmanship. No hostage-taking. Let's lift the debt ceiling together. Let's pay the debts that Democrats and Republicans, including Donald Trump, already incurred without ultimatums.

Tonight, I expect the President will make this very clear to the American people, and it will be the responsibility of House Republicans to show that they take the debt ceiling seriously before they create an unprecedented crisis that will wreak havoc on every single American.

CHINA

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now on the Chinese surveillance balloon, I

strongly—very strongly—condemn President Xi's brazen incursion into American airspace with the Chinese surveillance balloon, and I commend President Biden for being calm, calculated, and effective in taking down the balloon over water to ensure the safety of Americans on the ground and to ensure we maximize our intelligence gains as we examine this balloon, which is far less likely to burn and crash into a million pieces in water than over land.

Instead of criticizing China, I was shocked to hear MAGA Republicans—before they even knew what was happening, before they even knew the whole story—direct their criticism toward the President, saying that we should have shot down the balloon the moment we saw it. So it is clear that the MAGA Republican criticism was at best premature and at worst political.

This is one area where we don't need politics. We need Democrats and Republicans to come together to condemn China and be a unified front against the CCP.

President Biden and his team did the right thing. They waited and took down the balloon carefully, precisely, and with what both the military and intelligence experts urged them to do. Had the President not gone along with what the military said, I can imagine that some of these same Republicans, so highly political in their criticism, would have then criticized the President for not listening to the military leaders. But now we can recover most of the equipment and begin to analyze the technology in the way it was done.

Again, I applaud President Biden for his leadership. And on Thursday, all Senators—all Senators—we have upgraded this. Because so many Senators wanted a briefing, I asked the administration to do it as an all-Senators briefing instead of the Gang of 8, and that is what is going to happen. So all Senators will receive a classified briefing from administration officials on the surveillance balloon.

NOMINATION OF DEANDREA GIST BENJAMIN

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now, finally, on the Fourth Circuit, before Senators join with our House colleagues for the State of the Union, the Senate will take its first judicial nomination vote of the Congress by advancing DeAndrea Benjamin to serve as a circuit court judge—a circuit court judge—for the Fourth Circuit. If confirmed, Judge Benjamin would make history as only the second woman of color to sit on that court, a long overdue step in making sure the bench reflects the vibrancy of the Fourth Circuit. Judge Benjamin's credentials are unassailable, and I thank my Republican colleagues in the Judiciary Committee who supported her.

The Senate is going to continue prioritizing judicial confirmations on the floor of this Congress. We have a